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THOUGHT TRANSFERENCE:

AN APPLICATION OF MODERN THOUGHT TO
ANCIENT SUPERSTITIONS.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE

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BY

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THOUGHT TRANSFERENCE:

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THE progress of science may be likened to the ascent of a mist-covered mountain, of unknown and perhaps infinite height, up the sides of which we are slowly and laboriously groping our way, making our access as secure and permanent as we can; in some parts, indeed, constructing a good broad road. The clouds are very dense ahead of us, though there are legends of their having broken at times and let a nimble-footed traveller rush on far ahead. And such a one has sometimes blazed the trees or painted the rocks as he went, hoping thereby to assist us in following him; but we feel no security as to his destination, and distrust his marks. As scientific workers, we know no better nor safer plan, in the long run, than to map out our own slow route, ignoring all previous tracks, and making sure of the ground we have already covered by continually crossing and recrossing it in all directions.

The slope is not always ascending—there may be level tracts occasionally; sometimes we have actually to descend, in order to cross some stream or other depression. Not every knoll, again, lies on the direct route to the summit, but the clouds are so thick that the only way to detect the character of each minor hill-top is to explore it. Some choose one route and some another, and the multifarious cries resounding on all sides, as to the most advantageous path, are often perplexing.

Whenever the land in front of us seems to descend, the outcry is especially noisy; and yet such minor descents may be really an effective way of ultimately gaining the summit.

Down such a depression of scepticism, we of the middle of the nineteenth century have confessedly gone, though there are not wanting signs that we have touched bottom, and that the ascent on the other side is already beginning—though some there are so pleased with the ease of the descent, that they apparently hope it may last.

If this is indeed a real route to some of the higher peaks, a large number of camp-followers must similarly make the descent, and it will probably be for them a far more wholesome discipline, and lead more directly to ultimate progress, than standing still on points of vantage already attained, and being therewith content.

The knolls, or minor elevations, are crowded with satisfied people, who glory in their little achievements, and perceive not that to make progress they must partially descend. An era of doubt is essential. Doubt is the condition of a durable faith.

Those who have gone groping onward, and apparently downward, are already, it may be, higher than those left on the knolls; but vision is impossible through the mist, and shouting is very misleading, so they will not believe but that the temporary descent is leading the reckless and advancing spirits into some fearful abyss.

The shoutings are called a conflict of science and religion, and are given other sounding titles, but they do not amount to much on either side. The best plan is not to waste breath in shouting, but to forge on ahead, and try to make a decent road, or even a bridge, for the weaker brethren. Not that I would deny the existence of real chasms and crevasses, which some care is needed to avoid. The subject I have elected to speak on this evening is a rugged and difficult

cliff, with chasms lying all about its foot, strewn with the bones of explorers, and by many persons thought to lie off the track of profitable advance. By others it is thought to be crowned by a plateau of amazing extent and fertility, richer than anything we have yet attained, and well worth the labour and danger of ascent.

How much truth there is in either of these opinions I have no means of deciding. Every person engaged in the quest of truth must trust his instinct and ascend the elevations that come in his way.

It is unwise to turn your back on any real rise of ground, for you thereby run the risk of wilfully losing your way. Every path must be explored in the interest of truth.

By thought transference I mean a possible communication between mind and mind, by means other than any of the known organs of sense: what I may call a sympathetic connection between mind and mind; using the term mind in a vague and popular sense, without strict definition. Now, what do I mean by sympathetic connection? Take some examples:—

A pair of iron levers, one on the ground, the other some hundred yards away on a post, are often seen to be sympathetically connected; for when a railway official hauls one of them through a certain angle the distant lever or semaphore-arm revolves through a similar angle. The disturbance has travelled from one to the other through a very obvious medium of communication—viz., an iron wire or rope.

The pulling of a knob, followed by the ringing of a bell, is a similar process, and the transmission of the impulse in either of these cases is commonly considered simple and mechanical. It is not so simple as we think; for concerning cohesion we are exceedingly ignorant, and why one end

of a stick moves when the other end is touched no one at present is able clearly to tell us.

Consider, now, a couple of tuning forks, or precisely similar musical instruments, isolated from each other and from other bodies, suspended in air, let us say. Sound one of them and the other responds—i.e., begins to emit the same note. This is known in acoustics as sympathetic resonance; and again a disturbance has travelled through the medium from one to the other. The medium in this case is intangible, but quite familiar, viz., atmospheric air.

Next, suspend a couple of magnets, alike in all respects; pivoted, let us say, on points, at some distance from each other. Touch one of the magnets and set it swinging, the other begins to swing slightly, too. Once more a disturbance has travelled from one to the other, but the medium in this case is by no means obvious. It is nothing solid, liquid, or gaseous; that much is certain. Whether it is material or not depends partly on what we mean by material—partly requires more knowledge before a satisfactory answer can be given. We do, however, know something of the medium operative in this case, and we call it the Ether.

In these cases the intensity of the response varies rapidly with distance, and at a sufficiently great distance the response would be imperceptible.

This may be hastily set down as a natural consequence of a physical medium of communication, and a physical or mechanical disturbance; but it is not quite so.

Consider a couple of telephones connected properly by wires. They are sympathetic, and if one is tapped the other receives a shock. Speaking popularly, whatever is said to one is repeated by the other, and distance is practically unimportant; at any rate, there is no simple law of inverse square, or any such kind of law; there is a definite channel for the disturbance between the two.

The real medium of communication, I may say parenthetically, is still the ether.

Once more, take a mirror, pivoted on an axle, and capable of slight motion. At a distance let there be a suitable receiving instrument, say a drum of photographic paper and a lens. If the sun is shining on the mirror, and everything properly arranged, a line may be drawn by it on the paper miles away, and every tilt given to the mirror shall be reproduced as a kink in the line. And this may go on over great distances; no wire, or anything else commonly called "material" connecting the two stations, nothing but a beam of sunlight, a peculiar state of the ether.

So far we have been dealing with mere physics. Now poach a little on the ground of physiology. Take two brains, as like as possible, say belonging to two similar animals; place them a certain distance apart, with no known or obvious means of communication, and see if there is any sympathetic link between them. Apply a stimulus to one, and observe whether the other in any way responds? To make the experiment conveniently, it is best to avail oneself of the entire animal, and not of its brain alone. It is then easy to stimulate one of the brains through any of the creature's peripheral sense organs, and it may be possible to detect whatever effect is excited in the other brain by some motor impulse, some muscular movement of the appropriate animal.

So far as I know the experiment has hitherto been principally tried on man. This has certain advantages and certain disadvantages. The main advantage is that the motor result of intelligent speech is more definite and instructive than mere pawings and gropings or twitchings. The main disadvantage is that the liability to conscious deception and fraud becomes serious, much more serious than it is with a less cunning animal.

Of course it by no means follows that the experiment will succeed with a lower animal because it succeeds with man; but I am not aware of its having been tried at present except with man.

A simple mode of trying the experiment would be to pinch or hurt one animal and see if the other can feel any pain. If he does feel anything he will probably twitch and rub, or he may become vocal with displeasure.

There are two varieties of the experiment: First, with some manifest link or possible channel, as, for instance, where two individuals hold hands through a stuffed-up hole in the wall; and, second, with no such obvious medium, as when they are at a distance from one another.

Instead of simple pain in any part of the skin, one may stimulate the brain otherwise, by exciting some special sense organ; for instance, those of taste or smell. Apply nauseous or pleasant materials to the palate of one animal and watch the countenance of the other; or, if human, get the receptive person to describe the substance which the other is tasting.

These experiments have been tried with human subjects; they have been tried by Mr. Malcolm Guthrie and others in this city, and they have had a fair measure of positive result. But I am not concerned with making assertions regarding facts, or expecting credence at present. A serious amount of study is necessary before one is in a position to criticise any statement of fact. What I am concerned to show is that such experiments are not, on the face of them, absurd; that they are experiments which ought to be made; and that any result actually obtained, if definite and clear, ought to be gradually and cautiously accepted, whether it be positive or negative.

It may be objected that my mode of statement involves some hypothesis. The nerves of an individual, A, are stimulated, and the muscles of another individual, B,

respond. How do I know that the brain of either A or B has anything to do with it? Why may it not be an immediate connection between the peripheral sense organs themselves?

I think as we go on you will feel that this is improbable, and that we are driven by probability to ascend at least as high as brain in order to explain such facts as I have been postulating as possibly true. But I have not the slightest wish to dogmatise on the matter; and only to save time do I make that much assumption.

So far I have supposed the stimulus to be applied to the nerves of touch, or more generally the skin nerves, and to the taste nerves; but we may apply a stimulus equally well to the nerves of hearing, or of smelling, or of seeing. An experiment with a sound or a smell stimulus, however, is manifestly not very crucial unless the intervening distance between A and B is excessive; but a sight stimulus can be readily confined within narrow limits of space. Thus, a picture can be held up in front of the eyes of A, and B can be asked if he sees anything; and if he does, he can be told either to describe it or to draw it.

If the picture or diagram thus shown to A is one that has only just been drawn by the responsible experimenter himself; if it is one that has no simple name that can be signalled; if A is not allowed to touch B, or to move during the course of the experiment, and has never seen the picture before; if, by precaution of screening, rays from the picture can be positively asserted never to have entered the eyes of B; and if, nevertheless, B describes himself as seeing it, however dimly, and is able to draw it, in dead silence on the part of all concerned; then, I say, the experiment would be a good one.

But not yet would it be conclusive. We must consider who A and B are.

If they are a pair of persons who go about together, and make money out of the exhibition; if they are in any sense a brace of professionals accustomed to act together, I deny that anything is solidly proved by such an experiment, for cunning is by no means an improbable hypothesis.

Cunning takes such a variety of forms that it is tedious to discuss them; it is best to eliminate it altogether. That can be done by using unassorted individuals in unaccustomed rooms. True, the experiment may thus become much more difficult, if not indeed quite impossible. Two entirely different tuning forks will not respond. Two strangers are not usually sympathetic, in the ordinary sense of that word; perhaps we ought not to expect a response. Nevertheless, the experiment must be made; and if B is found able to respond, not only to A₁, but also to A₂, A₃, and other complete strangers, under the conditions already briefly mentioned, then the experiment may be regarded as satisfactory. I am prepared to assert that such satisfactory experiments have been made.

But the power of response in this way to the uninteresting impression of strangers does not appear to be a common faculty. The number of persons who can act efficiently as B is *apparently* very limited. But I do not make this assertion with any confidence, for so few people have as yet been seriously tried. It is most likely a question of degree. All shades of responsiveness may exist, from nearly 0 to something considerable.

More experiments are sadly wanted. They are not difficult to try, and sufficient variety may be introduced to prevent the observations from being too deplorably dull. They are I confess rather dull.

Before considering them satisfactory or publishing them it would be well to call in the assistance of a trained observer, who may be able to suggest further precautions;

but at first it is probably well to choose fairly easy conditions.

Relations are probably more likely to succeed than are strangers; persons who feel a sympathy with each other, who are accustomed to imagine they know what the other is thinking of, or to say things simultaneously, and such like vague traditions as are common in most families: such individuals as these would naturally be the most likely ones to begin with, until experiment shows otherwise. The A power seems common enough; the B power, so far as I know, is rather rare—at least to a prominent extent.

It is customary to call A the agent and B the percipient, but there are some objections to these names.

The name agent suggests activity, and it is a distinct question whether any conscious activity is necessary. Sender and receiver are terms that might be used, but they labour under similar and perhaps worse objections. For the present let us simply use the terms A and B, which involve no hypotheses whatever.

A may be likened to the sending telephone or transmitter; B to the receiving telephone.

A to the sounded fork or quivering magnet, B to the responsive one.

A to the flashing mirror, B to the sensitive sheet.

But observe that in all the cases hitherto mentioned a third person is mentioned too, the experimenter, C. A and B are regarded as mere tools, instruments, apparatus, for C to make his experiments with.

Both are passive till C comes and excites the nerve of A, either by pinching him, or by putting things in his mouth, or by showing him diagrams or objects; and B is then supposed to respond to A. It may be objected that he is really responding to C all the time. Yes, indeed, that may sometimes be so, and it is a distinct possibility to remember. If

something that C is unconsciously looking at is described by B, instead of the object which is set in front of A, the experiment will seem a failure. There are many such possibilities to bear in mind in so novel a region of research.

But now I want to go on and point out that C is not essential. He probably is not an assistance at all, very likely he is an obstruction even if he is a serious and well-intentioned being. But if D, E, F, are present too as irresponsible spectators, talking or fidgeting, or even sitting still and thinking, the conditions are bad. One can never be sure what F is doing, he may be simply playing the fool. An experiment conducted in front of a large audience is senseless and useless.

Whenever I use the term thought-transference I never mean anything like public performances, whether by genuine persons or impostors. The human race is so constituted that such performances have their value—they incite others to try experiments; but in themselves, and speaking scientifically, public performances are useless, and often tend to obscure a phenomenon by covering it with semi-legitimate contempt.

I fear that some hypnotic exhibitions are worse than useless; being analagous to vivisection experiments conducted, not to advance science, but to exhibit some well known fact again and again, not even to students, but to an idle gaping crowd.

To return, however, to A and B: let us suppose them left alone, not stimulated by any third person; it is quite possible for A to combine the functions of C with his own functions, and to stimulate himself. He may look at a picture or a playing card, or he may taste a substance, or he may, if he can, simply think of a number, or a scene, or an event, and, so to speak, keep it vividly in his mind. It may happen that B will be able to describe the scene of which A

is thinking, sometimes almost correctly, sometimes with a large admixture of error, or at least of dimness.

The experiment is virtually the same as those above mentioned, and may be made quite a good one; the only weak part is that, under the circumstances, everything depends on the testimony of A, and A is not always believed.

This is, after all, a disability which he shares with C; and, at any rate, he is able to convince *himself* by such experiments, provided they are successful.

But now go a step further. Let A and B be not thinking of experimenting at all. Let them be at a distance from one another, and going about their ordinary vocations, including somnolence and the other passive as well as active occupations of the twenty-four hours. Let us, however, not suppose them strangers, but relatives or intimate friends; still better, *perhaps* (I make no assertions on any of these points), twin brothers. Now let something vividly excite A; let him fall down a cliff, or be run over by a horse, or fall into a river; or let him be taken violently ill, or be subject to some strong emotion; or let him be at the point of death.

Is it not conceivable that if any such sympathetic connexion between individuals as I have been postulating exists, if a paltry stimulus supplied by a third person is capable in the slightest degree of conveying itself from one individual to another, is it not conceivable or even probable that a violent stimulus, such as we have supposed A to receive, may be able to induce in B, even though inattentive and otherwise occupied, some dim echo, reverberation, response, and cause him to be more or less aware that A is suffering or perturbed. If B is busy, self-absorbed, actively engaged, he may notice nothing. If he happen to be quiescent, vacant, moody, or half or whole asleep, he may realise and be

conscious of something. He may perhaps only feel a vague sense of depression in general; or he may feel the depression and associate it definitely with A; or he may be more distinctly aware of what is happening, and call out that A has had a fall, or an accident, or is being drowned, or is ill; or he may have a specially vivid dream which will trouble him long after he wakes, and may be told to other persons, and written down; or he may think he hears A's voice; or, lastly, he may conjure up an image of A so vividly before his "mind's eye" that he may be able to persuade himself and others that he has seen his apparition:—sometimes a mere purposeless apparition, sometimes in a setting of a sort of vision or picture not unlike what is at the time elsewhere really happening.

The Society for Psychical Research have, with sublime perseverance and diligence, undertaken and carried forward the thankless labour of receiving and sifting a great mass of testimony to phenomena such as I have hinted at. They have published some of them in two large volumes, called *Phantasms of the Living*. Fresh evidence comes in every month. The evidence is so cumulative, and some of it is so well established, as to bear down the dead wall of scepticism in all those who have submitted to the drudgery of a study of the material. The evidence induces belief. It is not yet copious enough to lead to a valid induction.

I cannot testify to these facts as I can to the simple experiments where I have acted the part of C; evidence for spontaneous or involuntary thought transference must obviously depend on statements received from A and from B, as well as from other persons, some in the neighbourhood of A, others in the neighbourhood of B, together with contemporary newspaper reports, *Times*' obituaries, and other past documents relating to matters of fact, which are available for scrutiny, and may be regarded as trustworthy.

I am prepared, however, to confess that the weight of testimony is sufficient to satisfy my own mind that such things do undoubtedly occur; that the distance between England and India is no barrier to the sympathetic communication of intelligence in some way of which we are at present ignorant; that, just as a signalling key in London causes a telegraphic instrument to respond instantaneously in Teheran, which is an every-day occurrence, so the danger or death of a distant child, or brother, or husband, may be signalled, without wire or telegraph clerk, to the heart of a human being fitted to be the recipient of such a message.

We call the process telepathy—sympathy at a distance; we do not understand it. What is the medium of communication? Is it through the air, like the tuning forks; or through the ether, like the magnets; or is it something non-physical, and exclusively psychical? No one can as yet tell you. We must know far more about it before we can answer that question, perhaps before we can be sure whether the question has a meaning or not.

Undoubtedly, the scientific attitude, after being forced to admit the fact, is to assume a physical medium, and to discover it and its processes if possible. When the attempt has failed, it will be time enough to enter upon fresh hypotheses.

Meanwhile, plainly, telepathy strikes us as a spontaneous occurrence of that intercommunication between mind and mind (or brain and brain), which for want of a better term we at present style thought-transference. We may be wrong in thus regarding it, but as scientific men that is how we are bound to regard it unless forced by the weight of evidence into some apparently less tenable position.

The opinion is strengthened by the fact that the spontaneously occurring impressions can be artificially and experimentally imitated by conscious attempts to produce

them. Individuals are known who can by an effort of will excite the brain of another person at a moderate distance, say another part of the same town, possibly further, I am not sure of that, so that these second persons imagine that they hear him call or that they see his face.

These are called experimental apparitions, and appear well established. These experiments also want repeating. They require care, obviously; but they are very valuable pieces of evidence, and must contribute immensely to experimental psychology.

What now is the meaning of this unexpected sympathetic resonance, this syntonic reverberation between minds? Is it conceivably the germ of a new sense, as it were, something which the human race is, in the progress of evolution, destined to receive in fuller measure? or is it the relic of a faculty possessed by our animal ancestry before speech was?

I have no wish to intrude speculations upon you, and I cannot answer these questions except in terms of speculation. I wish to assert nothing but what I believe to be solid and verifiable facts.

Let me, however, point out that the intercommunion of minds, the exciting in the brain of B a thought possessed by A, is after all a very ordinary and well known process. We have a quantity of well-arranged mechanism to render it possible. The human race has advanced far beyond the animal in the development of this mechanism; and civilised man has advanced beyond savages. Conceivably, by thus developing the mechanism, we may have begun to lose the spontaneous and really simple form of the power; but the power with mechanism conspicuously exists.

I whisper a secret to A, and a short time afterwards I find that B is perfectly aware of it. It sometimes happens so. It has probably happened in what we are accustomed to

consider a very commonplace fashion; A has told him. When you come to analyse the process, however, it is not really at all simple. I will not go into tedious details; but when you remember that all that conveyed the thought was the impalpable compressions and dilatations of a gas, and that in the process of transmission it existed for a finite space of time in this intermediate and curiously mechanical condition, you may realise something of puzzlement in the process. I am not sure but that we ought to consider some direct sympathy between two minds, without this mechanical process, as really a more simple and direct mode of conveying an idea. However, all dualism is repugnant when pressed far enough, and I by no means intend to insist on any real and essential antithesis between mind and matter, between idea and process. Pass on to another illustration.

Tell a secret to A, in New Zealand, and discover that B, in St. Petersburg, is before long aware of it, neither having travelled. How can that happen? That is not possible to a savage; it would seem to him mysterious. It is mysterious in reality. The idea existed for a time in the form of black scrawls on a bit of paper, which travelled between the two places. A transfer of material occurred, not an aerial vibration; the piece of paper held in front of B's eyes excited in him the idea or knowledge of fact which I had communicated to A.

Not even a material transfer is necessary however; nothing flows along a telegraph wire, and the air is undisturbed by an electric current, but thought transference through the etherial medium (with the help of a telegraph or telephone wire) is an accomplished fact, though it would have puzzled our ancestors of last century. And yet it is not really new, it is only the distance and perfection of it that is new. The old semaphore system of signalling, as well as the heliograph method, is really a utilisation of the

ether for thought transference. Much information, sometimes of momentous character, may be conveyed by a wink or nod; or even by a look. These also are messages sent through the ether. The eye is affected by disturbances arriving through the ether, and by those alone.

Now, then, I say, shut the eyes, stop the ears, transmit no material substance, interpose distance sufficient to stop all pushing and pulling. Can thought or ideas still be transmitted? Experiment answers they can. But what the medium is, and how the process occurs, it remains for further investigation to ascertain.

We reduced our initial three individuals to two; we can reduce the two to one. It is possible for the A and B functions to be apparently combined in one individual. Some practice seems necessary for this, and it is a curious state of things. It seems assisted by staring at an object such as a glass globe or crystal—a slight amount of self-hypnotism probably. Then you see visions and receive impressions, or sometimes your hand works unconsciously, as if one part of your brain was signalling to another part, and your own identity was dormant or complexed for a time. But in these cases of so-called automatic writing, crystal vision, trance-utterance, clairvoyance, and the like, are we quite sure whether it is a case of A and B at all; and, if so, whether the subject before us is really acting as both? I am not sure; I rather doubt it in some cases. It is possible that the clairvoyant is responding to some unknown world-mind of which he forms a part. This possibility must not be ignored in ordinary cases of apparent thought-transference, too.

Well, now, take a further step. Suppose I discover a piece of paper with scrawls on it. I may guess they are intended for something, but as they are to me illegible hieroglyphics, I carry it to one person after another, and get them

to look at it, but it excites in them no response. They perceive little more than a savage would perceive. But not so with all of them. One man to whom I show it has the perceptive faculty, so to speak; he becomes wildly excited; he begins to sing; he rushes for an arrangement of wood and catgut, and fills the air with vibrations. Even the others can now faintly appreciate the meaning. The piece of paper was a lost manuscript of Beethoven.

What sort of thought transference is that? Where is the A to whom the ideas originally occurred? He has been dead for years; his thought has been fossilised, lain dormant in matter, but it only wanted a sympathetic and educated mind to perceive it, to revive it, and to make it the property of the world. Idea, I call it; but it is not only idea: there may be a world of emotion thus stored up in matter, ready to be released as by a detent. Action of mind on matter, reaction of matter on mind—are these things, after all, commonplaces too?

If so what is not possible?

Here is a room where a tragedy occurred, where the human spirit was strung to intensest anguish. Is there any trace of that agony present still and able to be appreciated by an attuned or receptive mind? I assert nothing, except that it is not inconceivable. If it happen, it may take many forms; vague disquiet perhaps, or imaginary sounds or vague visions, or perhaps a dream or picture of the event as it occurred. Understand I do not regard the evidence for these things as so conclusive as for some of the other phenomena I have dealt with, but the belief in such facts may be forced upon us, and you perceive that the garment of superstition is already dropping from them. They will take their place, if true, in an orderly universe, along with other not wholly unallied and already well known occurrences.

Relics again: is it credible that a relic, a lock of hair, an

old garment, retains any indication of a departed, retains any portion of his personality. Does not an old letter? Does not a painting? An "old master" we call it. Aye, there may be much of the personality of the old master thus preserved. Is not the emotion felt on looking at it a kind of thought transference from the departed? A painting differs from a piece of music in that it is constantly incarnate, so to speak. It is there for all to see, for some to understand. The music requires incarnation, it can be performed as we say, and then it can be appreciated. But in no case without the attuned and thoughtful mind; and so these things are, in a sense, thought-transference, but deferred thought-transference. They may be likened to telepathy not only reaching over tracts of space but deferred through epochs of time.*

Think over these great things and be not unduly sceptical about little things. An attitude of keen and critical enquiry must continually be maintained, and in that sense any amount of scepticism is not only legitimate but necessary. The kind of scepticism I deprecate is not that which sternly questions and rigorously probes, it is rather that which confidently asserts and dogmatically denies; but this kind is not true scepticism, in the proper sense of the word, for it deters enquiry and forbids inspection. It is too positive concerning the boundaries of knowledge and the line where superstition begins.

Phantasms and dreams, and ghosts, crystal-gazing, premonitions, and clairvoyance: the region of superstition; yes, but possibly also the region of fact. As taxes on credulity they are trifles compared to the things we are already

*They are not technical telepathy, as defined, of course, because they occur through accustomed ways and processes. Technical telepathy is the attainment of the same result through unaccustomed ways and processes.

familiar with; only too familiar with; stupidly and inanely inappreciative of.

Let superstition envelope the whole of our knowledge and existence if it envelope any, but let it be called by a less ignoble name.